

Joe lives in a world that has been mostly flooded by water. He is a Beef – someone who dives for treasure in sunken buildings. In this extract a man called Colpeper has sent him in search of a precious item.

Floodworld

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Joe scanned the nearby buildings for the word Colpeper had made him memorise. A sign said POST OFFICE, another SUPERMARKET – a large flat structure with a line of rusty carts anchored outside. Then he saw it. Letters were missing so that the sign now read “R XY C EMA”, but this had to be the place. It was a squat brick building, the entrance just a gaping rust-edged hole. Joe swam closer, taking hold of the steel frame. He peered inside.

The carpets, once red, were almost black with silt. Joe tugged the torch from his pocket, winding the crank five times, then flicking the switch. Shapes emerged from the gloom: rotted chairs and a smooth fibreglass counter. The walls were lined with pictures sealed in grimy frames. Joe wiped one clean and saw a woman wearing next to nothing holding a gun in her hand. He wondered what kind of place it had been, this cinema.

Silver winked as a school of sprats darted out of the light. Doors branched left and right, blocked with fallen debris. But in the far corner a flight of steps led up to another larger door. A sign read SCREEN ONE just like Colpeper said.

The hinges were stiff but a few cautious tugs pulled the door wide enough for Joe to squeeze through. The room inside was dark and cavernous. He felt his heartbeat quicken. It wouldn't take much, a rotted roof beam or a rusted girder, and he'd be trapped, crushed in the rubble or buried alive until his air ran out. It wasn't uncommon these days; with each passing year they had to swim deeper and search harder to find anything worth bringing up. The life of a Beef was getting riskier all the time.

The room was full of chairs all facing the opposite way. The far wall was perfectly flat and perfectly white, and Joe wondered why people would come in here to sit and stare at nothing. Perhaps this was another sort of church – maybe they'd flash pictures of their god on that wall and sing hymns in the dark.

Something brushed against Joe's foot and he started. A sea snake wound into the darkness, undulating bands of yellow and black. He took a deep pull of oxygen. This place was starting to give him the creeps.

A glint of reflected light told him he'd found what he was looking for. A glass case stood against the wall, a laminated sign taped to it. The words were faded but readable: COLLECT 10 TOKENS TO CLAIM YOUR EXCLUSIVE ACTION FIGURE!

He peered closer and his heart sank. A jagged crack ran across the face of the cabinet and the inside was full of filthy water. Colpeper had been very clear – any damage and the sale would be off. Joe spat out his mouthpiece, clasping the torch between his teeth. He touched the front of the case and the glass fell away, the hinges rusted to nothing. The objects inside were soaked but he reached in anyway, fingers wrapping round something small and hard.

It looked like a sort of skinny bear standing on two feet. His fur had once been brown but the paint had soaked away to reveal textured grey plastic underneath. His lips were drawn back in a snarl, but his eyes were still blue and there was something friendly about him. Joe scratched the bear under the chin and pondered.

So this was what he had been sent to find. Plastic toys, the kind they kept in a crate at school for the younger kids to play with. And yet someone inside the City – a collector, Colpeper had called him – was willing to pay serious money for them. Maybe this collector didn't know that someone like Joe

would end up risking his life to get them. Maybe he didn't know that the money he'd offered could keep a Shanty family alive for a year. Or maybe he just didn't care.

Joe slipped the plastic figure into his pocket, reaching for his mouthpiece. But as he did so something scraped against his arm and he jerked round in surprise. Empty eye sockets stared back, white teeth grinning from a face picked clean.

The air exploded from Joe's lungs, the torch slipping from between his teeth. It tumbled down into the silt and the room was plunged into darkness.

Joe scrambled for his mouthpiece, hands shaking. He felt the skeleton drift alongside, bony fingers scraping at his scalp. He'd seen bodies before, human and animal, that was just part of being a Beef. But he'd never been touched by one before.

He found the mouthpiece and shoved it in, taking an urgent breath. The torch glimmered below him and he scrambled for it, taking hold just as the bulb died. Lucky, he thought. A few more seconds and he might never have found it. He wound the crank, the beam flashing across white bone. He shut his eyes and gave a shove. Limbs spun loose, ribs and vertebrae tumbling into the darkness.

He wiped his hands on his shorts, knowing it was a ridiculous thing to do. He almost laughed, then he gathered himself. The only thing left was to head back up and break the news to his boss. Hopefully Colpeper was in a forgiving mood.